

UC regents drop fee increases from budget plan

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The University of California Board of Regents decided on Thursday to remove student fee and tuition increases from its budget proposal for the 2009-10 school year.

It was a decision that now puts the burden on the state Legislature to either provide funding that would avert the need for such increases or force those enrolled in the UC system to come up with the money themselves.

The move - depending on who you talked to - was a strategic triumph, a bad idea or totally meaningless.

"For the first time in my recollection, the budget goes forward without student fee increases in it," said Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, the regent who led the push to remove \$215 million in increases from the proposal the full board later approved.

The budget calls for a \$755 million jump in the UC system's core operating budget, or 14 percent, over this year.

Higher fees had been included in a UC budget proposal the regents' finance committee voted for Wednesday, even though everyone agreed the board was not ready to formally act on such a volatile issue.

Garamendi went well beyond that on Thursday by insisting that no hint of raising student fees should appear in the budget proposal, which the governor and state Legislature will deal with early next year.

"Student fees are too high and we shouldn't increase them," Garamendi said.

"It's an starting point for a critical issue," he added outside the meeting. "Are we going to tax students or not? It's important that you call upon the Legislature and governor to fund the university."

D'Artagnan Scorza, a student regent from UCLA, agreed.

"To start off with assuming student fee increases cuts off our legs," Scorza said.

The assumption, in this case, was the amount of revenue that would be generated by a 9.4 boost in mandatory systemwide student fees - broken down into increases of 10 percent for tuition, 5 to 24 percent for professional schools and 4.2 percent in the registration fee, which covers student services ranging from the cafeteria to intramural sports. Enrollment growth would

produce additional fees.

Although UC President Mark Yudof voted to yank the higher fees from the budget proposal, he said he didn't think it mattered much one way or the other, given that it was only November.

"The odds are overwhelming that we will have an increase in fees," Yudof said. "We don't know the exact amount."

Regent Judith Hopkinson tried to be equally pragmatic, which prompted her to disagree with the overwhelming sentiment in favor of taking student fees out of the equation. She said there was not a "snowball's chance" that the state would fund UC's entire budget proposal and provide money to stave off fee increases.

"If we reduce the fee amount, that's money the state is not going to give us," Hopkinson said.

It was "appalling" for UC to be in a position to raise fees once again, said the regent, who urged a long-range solution to UC's budget crisis - one that is exacerbated by California's deepening fiscal nightmare and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal to cut \$65.5 million in the near future from the current UC budget.

The UC system raised undergraduate tuition this year to \$6,571. It was \$3,859 in the 2002-03 school year.

Several regents said they hoped the issue of student fees increases would be resolved in a timely manner because parents must decide in only a few months where - or if - to send their children to college.

It's a perennial dilemma: academic timetables are often at odds with the pace of legislative life.

"The political process rolls on irrespective of the real deadlines students have in their lives," Yudof said.

Yudof, a lawyer from Philadelphia and former law professor, added: "I've been around a lot of legislators, and they're like many of my former law students. There was no doubt they'd accomplish their work in May or June - it would not occur in January or February."

For that reason, he said, it will be hard to put off the fee question until UC's budgetary problems are resolved in Sacramento. The 10-campus system received \$3.070 billion from the state this year and would like to get \$3.809 billion for the 2009-10 school year.

Thursday's session - the last in a three-day meeting at UCSF Mission Bay - started off with a spirited round of public comment, much like the day before.

A roomful of angry people lobbied for everything from the rights of undocumented students to more diversity in medical schools.

The low salaries of UC service workers, currently in negotiations with the university, dominated the session, which ended with the arrests of seven labor leaders from around the state.

The seven chanted "No contract, no peace" for almost half an hour, prompting most regents to eventually leave the room and UC police to escort the protesters off the premises.

UC police Capt. Jon Easterbrook said they were charged with two misdemeanors: trespassing and failure to disperse. By the time the meeting ended, all seven had been cited and released.

San Francisco Supervisor Tom Ammiano, the first speaker of the day, urged the regents to treat the service workers fairly.

"When we talk about stimulus packages, we need to talk about people at the lower end of the economic scale," he said. "I implore you to respect the work these people do."

Their situation also came up Monday night when Yudof appeared at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

"We have significant concerns about our service employees," Yudof said. "Their pay is not very good."

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